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ABSTRACT

Seven commonly held myths concerning the effects of teachers' strikes on school districts are explored. Administrators from 124 school districts that experienced teacher strikes during the three-year period 1981-1984 responded to a questionnaire about the seven myths. The myths discussed include: (1) superintendents leave districts as a result of teachers' strikes; (2) teachers who cross picket lines eventually leave the school district; (3) teachers' strikes impact district policy; (4) substitutes who cross picket lines are not hired to teach in the district; (5) substitutes who cross picket lines and are later hired are not accepted by their colleagues; (6) future levies are defeated as a result of teachers' strike; and (7) students are negatively affected by teachers' strikes. The study indicates that common assumptions about the effects of teacher strikes are unfounded but important policy decisions are often based on these beliefs. (CB)

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TEACHERS' STRIKES: MAXIMS OR MYTHS

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Abstract

This article looks at seven commonly held myths concerning the effects of teachers' strikes on school districts. School districts throughout the United States, which had experienced teachers' strikes within the previous three years, responded to a questionnaire from the Council for Educational Issues from Eastern Washington University. Administrators from striking districts reported some of the longterm repercussions suffered by themselves, teachers, substitutes, students and school budgets following teachers' strikes.

TEACHERS' STRIKES: MAXIMS OR MYTHS

Consider these assertions: 1. Following a teachers' strike, district superintendents often resign their positions. 2. Full-time teachers who cross picket lines, usually leave the district to continue their careers.

These two beliefs were among seven examined in a study recently conducted by the Council for Educational Issues from the Department of Education at Eastern Washington University. This study asked direct questions about some commonly held assumptions to the 124 school districts throughout the United States which had experienced strikes during the three year period of 1981 - 1984. Forty-four percent of the districts answered the questionnaire.

According to the administrators who responded, some of those original assumptions seemed to reflect what actually occurred, but others appeared to be grossly inaccurate. What follows is a list of seven beliefs which frequently influence school district policies. In an effort to present a more accurate picture than percentages alone can provide, the observations and comments of the respondents have been included.

Myth Number 1: Superintendents leave districts as a result of teachers' strikes.

Superintendents, as spokesmen for the school board, often become targets for media attention. For various reasons, they may appear unsympathetic to employee concerns or give the impression that they alone are capable of understanding district-wide needs. If they are perceived as

prolonging the strike by refusing to negotiate, most of this attention becomes negative very quickly. It seemed likely that superintendents would look elsewhere for a more supportive staff following a strike. However, in 94% of the responding districts, those superintendents who were in place during the strike were still leading their districts at the time of the survey (Spring 1984).

Myth Number 2: Teachers who cross picket lines to continue teaching during the strike leave the school district to continue their careers.

Conflict between those teachers who honor a strike and those who cross picket lines seemed inevitable and in 9% of the districts it was noted that a few teachers did leave because of the strike. However, in the majority of cases, not one teacher, who crossed picket lines to continue teaching during the strike, had left the district. While tension between striking and non-striking teachers was evident during the strike, administrators from most of the districts reported that within a short time, few noticeable effects remained.

Myth Number 3: Teachers' strikes impact district policy.

The alledged purpose of teachers' strikes is to effect change within school district policies. Most commonly, teachers' salaries and working conditions are the focus of conflict. In 81% of the responding districts, no changes were noted in either operational processes or district policies. Of the 19% which indicated changes resulting from the strike, four noted improved efforts at communication among all parties and five implemented specifically negotiated contract items such as class size and Reduction in Force policies.

Myth Number 4: Substitutes who cross picket lines are not hired to teach in the district.

Eighty-five percent of the responding districts had no information regarding the status of those substitutes who filled in during the teachers' strikes. However, 88% of responding districts later hired some of these substitute teachers to either full-time or part-time positions.

Myth Number 5: Substitutes who cross picket lines and are later hired, are not accepted by their colleagues.

It would be expected that the personal and professional relationships between those teachers who crossed picket lines and those who didn't would be strained. However, only 14% felt that "non-striking teachers had been isolated from the rest of the staff", while 40% of the administrators reported "no problems" within a year after the strike.

Myth Number 6: Future levies are defeated as a result of the teachers' strike.

The belief that levies and bond issues are unpassable in districts which have recently experienced teachers' strikes was supported by the fact that over 70% of the districts did not even place these issues before the voters. Among those who did ask their patrons for additional monies, 67% were passed and 33% were defeated.

Myth Number 7: Students are negatively affected by teachers' strikes.

The survey item which generated the most emotional response was that which discussed the effects of teachers' strikes on students. Some students were reported losing "respect for teachers" and others resented having sports programs interrupted. Seniors, in particular, worried about

qualifying for college scholarships and postponing graduation ceremonies. While 46% of the districts questioned reported some negative repercussions resulting from the strike, the majority reported no noticeable effect on students. However, to illustrate the emotional reaction to this question, we include the following response received from only one district. "During the teachers' strike our achievement scores showed an improvement higher than the previous three years."

CONCLUSION

As seen from the table below, our assumptions regarding the effects of teachers' strikes were unfounded. However, important policy decisions are often based on our belief systems, since ready statistical information is not always available. It may be time for school districts to reassess their assumptions prior to making significant policy decisions.

Summary of Findings

Issues	Yes	No
1) Superintendents leave districts as a result of teachers' strikes.....	6%	94%
2) Teachers who cross picket lines leave the school district.....	9%	91%
3) Teachers' strikes impact district policy.....	19%	81%
4) Substitutes who cross picket lines are not hired to teach in the district.....	12%	88%
5) Substitutes who cross picket lines and are later hired, are not accepted by their colleagues.....	14%	40%

6) Future levies are defeated as a result of the teachers' strike.....	33%	67%
7) Students are negatively affected by teachers' strikes.....	46%	54%

Of course every school district strike has its own unique set of circumstances and outcomes. While the specific details of each district must be considered, we can still learn much from the experiences of school districts across the nation. In view of the information reported, it would seem prudent for the education community to reevaluate its assumptions and modify its beliefs if they prove inaccurate. Ideas which have proven logical and reasonable may still be built upon common myth.